Pennsylvania Society
Sons of the Revolution

Captain Gustavus Conyngham

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PRESENTED BY

TOMB OF CAPTAIN GUSTAVUS CONYNGHAM

IN ST. PETER'S CHURCHYARD, PHILADELPHIA.

Captain Gustavus Conyngham

A SKETCH OF
THE SERVICES HE RENDERED TO THE CAUSE
OF AMERICAN INDEPENDENCE

BY

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CAPTAIN GUSTAVUS CONYNGHAM

I

The Pennsylvania Society of Sons of the Revolution have recently restored the old tomb of Captain Gustavus Conyngham in St. Peter's Church-yard that had (until within a month or two) been forgotten for nearly a century. When the flags and flowers were so generously distributed among the graves of the heroes of the country on Memorial Day, there were none for the tomb of Conyngham. Yet this brave man, whose bones lie here, rendered the cause of Independence an exceptional service in an exceptional way. With his little cruisers he gave the Channel fleet of England and the statesmen of Europe as much, if not more, to think about than any other man of his period. There was so much of the heroic in the service he rendered, and so much of practical value in its results, that his fame was entitled to a stronger hold upon his countrymen.

His tomb stands in a remote corner of the church-yard, within a stone's throw of the house on Lombard Street in which he lived and died, and near the resting-place of Charles Willson Peale, the famous portrait painter of the Revolution.

Within this old church-yard, which is now in the background of a great modern city, are the graves of many others who filled very prominent places in the earlier history of the country. Benjamin Chew, Chief Justice of Pennsylvania in 1774; Jacob Duché, the

descendant of a Huguenot, who read the prayers at the opening session of the first Continental Congress in Carpenters' Hall; Robert Blackwell, who was chaplain of the First Pennsylvania Brigade at Valley Forge; Du Simitiere, the celebrated portrait painter; Stephen Decatur, whose deeds have shed such bright lustre upon our naval history, and his father of the same name, who was also a Commodore in the Navy; Nicholas Biddle, President of the United States Bank; William Shippin, who was one of the officers killed at the battle of Princeton; Richard Peters, Judge of the United States District Court, whose country house at Belmont is still preserved; that eminent lawyer, Moses Levy; William Plumstead, one of the Mayors of Philadelphia in early Colonial days; a long line of Indian chieftains, who came down from what was then the wilderness to hold a council with their great father, when Philadelphia was the seat of the white man's government; Alexander James Dallas, who was James Madison's Secretary of the Treasury; George M. Dallas, Vice-President of the United States, and Joseph R. Ingersoll, Minister to England.

All these, and many others of lesser note, lie buried with Conyngham in ground that was the gift of Richard and Thomas Penn, within the high brick wall with the marks of more than a century upon it which surrounds the block bounded by Third, Fourth, and Pine Streets. The little city of which this place was once such a conspicuous feature has grown to be one of the great cities of the world. There are seventy-two times as many people in it now as there were then, but amid all its greater activities it still turns with reverence to this spot so closely identified with the men

PORTRAIT OF CAPTAIN CONYNGHAM.

From a French print published in 1779. (By permission of The Outlook.)

and times of its early history. This old Colonial church revives the past to those who look at it across the hundred and fifty years that lie between them, because by some good fortune, or the good sense and devotion of those who cared for it (it is hard now to say which), it has survived that devastating period when it was thought to be the part of wisdom to change or modernize everything. It had its narrow escapes from the ruthless hand of this modernizer that fell so heavily upon all the other churches of the city, but it has lost none of the stern simplicity of its old Colonial lines, within or without, which so distinctly identify it with the days when those capable people built their buildings upon a scale and with a taste that commands the admiration and imitation of the present generation. So people turn to it as the only perfect link that connects the present with a past whose lessons are well worth learning; with the days when those who are buried there were worthy actors in the drama of life; with the days when Richard Peters, who had been Secretary of the Province, preached there; with the days when two of its clergy, Coombe and Duché, were conspicuous for their loyalty to the King; with the days when its bells were taken down and carried to Bethlehem for safety; when the officers of the British army, in their red coats, filled its high-backed pews, during the British occupation, when the services were conducted by chaplains of the British army; with the days when Washington worshipped there during the winter that followed the surrender at Yorktown; with the long period that covered the ministry of Bishop White.

But there is no tomb in St. Peter's Church-yard which claims more romantic interest than that of Captain

Gustavus Conyngham, unless it be the tomb of Decatur. Its modest inscription, almost obliterated by time, suggests nothing of the daring deeds and the heroic sufferings of this gallant officer in the Continental service. It is as follows:

CAPTAIN GUSTAVUS CONYNGHAM

who departed this life on the 27th. Nov'r
1819, in the 76th year of his age.

HERE LIES
Gone to his dear Saviour's Rest,
United from earth he flies
Secured from harm he meets the blest,
The pure above the skies.
Ah! who shall lament him, dead?
Vain man 'twas God's decree,
Upon the Rock he rests his head,
Safe through Eternity.

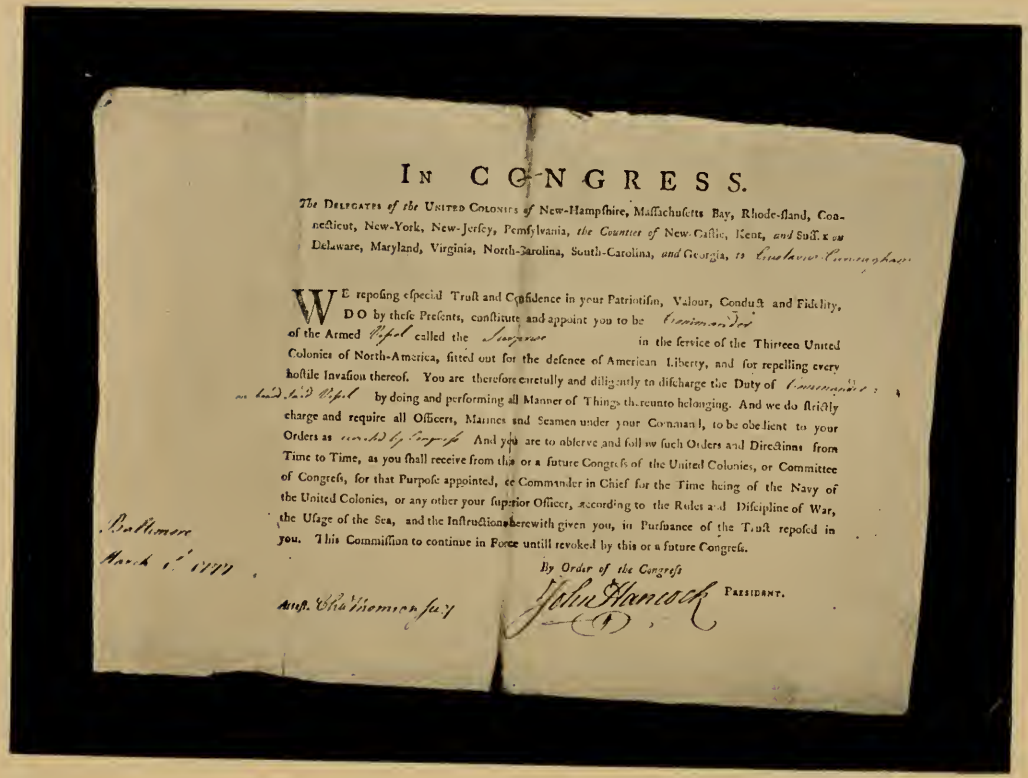
When the difficulties with the mother country reached the stage of active hostility it was clearly the policy of the Colonies to attack her at sea, where she was most vulnerable. Being a great commercial nation, anything that would interfere with her commerce would be most disastrous in its effects, and would be most keenly felt by her people in their homes. It was, indeed, about the only way the Colonists had of making the English people feel directly some of the horrors and inconveniences of war which were being inflicted upon them by an invading army. During the war, therefore, privateers under letters of marque were sent out in great numbers to prey upon English commerce wherever it could be found. The opportunities for this were not so great in American waters. There was comparatively little trading between the Colonies and England, but her commercial intercourse with the whole world was

concentrated in the English and Irish Channels and the adjacent seas. This, therefore, was the most inviting place for this kind of attack, but it was at the same time the most perilous, for these channels were narrow and these seas were limited in their area, and they were all carefully guarded by large, vigilant, and fully equipped English fleets. It therefore required qualities of the very highest order in the man who could successfully venture upon the perilous undertaking of attacking British commerce in this restricted field.

Through one of those unknown processes by which certain men seem to be raised up for certain emergencies, such a man appeared in Philadelphia in 1775, by the name of Gustavus Conyngham. Born in County Donegal, in the far north of Ireland, in 1744, he had emigrated to America some time before the Revolution, with his father, and settled in Philadelphia, where he married Ann Hockley, who is buried at St. Peter's in the same tomb with him.

Late in 1775 we find him on his way from Philadelphia to Holland in the brig "Charming Peggy," upon what he supposed was an errand to bring back a cargo of powder, saltpetre, arms, and clothing. This, however, was clearly not his real mission, and so, owing to adverse winds, it failed. Such a cargo could not be openly procured, and he was obliged to run the "Charming Peggy" stealthily in behind Texel Island, where, after some delay, the cargo was brought out to her by two Dutch vessels employed for the purpose. Contrary winds detained him in those difficult waters until it was too late. Through the treachery of one of his crew his vessel was seized by the authorities, and

he was put under arrest. But this reverse of fortune could not subdue him. Favorable winds at last springing up, he disarmed the guard that had been placed on board, and put out with the "Charming Peggy" to sea. But fate seems to have had higher exploits in reserve for him, and so he did not succeed in getting away. He was soon becalmed, and finding himself in danger of recapture, he took to his boats and escaped.



IN CONGRESS.

The DELEGATES of the UNITED COLONIES of New-Hampshire, Massachusetts Bay, Rhode-Island, Connecticut, New-York, New-Jersey, Pennsylvania, the Counties of New-Castle, Kent, and Sussex on Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, North-Carolina, South-Carolina, and Georgia, to Gustavus Conyngham

WE reposing especial Trust and Confidence in your Patriotism, Valour, Conduct and Fidelity, DO by these Presents, constitute and appoint you to be Commander of the Armed Vessel called the Surprize in the service of the Thirteen United Colonies of North-America, fitted out for the defence of American Liberty, and for repelling every hostile Invasion thereof. You are therefore carefully and diligently to discharge the Duty of Commander in and to the said Vessel by doing and performing all Manner of Things thereunto belonging. And we do strictly charge and require all Officers, Marines and Seamen under your Command, to be obedient to your Orders as agreeable to Congress. And you are to observe and follow such Orders and Directions from Time to Time, as you shall receive from this or a future Congress of the United Colonies, or Committee of Congress, for that Purpose appointed, or Commander in Chief for the Time being of the Navy of the United Colonies, or any other your superior Officer, according to the Rules and Discipline of War, the Usage of the Sea, and the Instructions herewith given you, in Pursuance of the Trust reposed in you. This Commission to continue in Force untill revoked by this or a future Congress.

Baltimore
March 1st 1777

By Order of the Congress
John Hancock PRESIDENT.

Attest. Chas Thomson Secy

COMMISSION OF CAPTAIN CONYNGHAM.

(By permission of The Outlook.)

II

When the American Commissioners, Dr. Franklin, Silas Deane, and Arthur Lee, reached France, early in 1776, they found Conyngham there and took him into their confidence. A complete understanding having been reached between them, they filled up one of the blank commissions that had been entrusted to them by Congress with his name as commander of an armed vessel called the "Surprise." This commission was dated March 1, 1777. Conyngham was in London during that month, where, it is said, he procured the armament of the "Surprise." She was a fast English cutter of about one hundred tons, that had been purchased by the Commissioners in Dover and brought over to Dunkirk, which, for some reason, had always been a favorite rendezvous for privateers. Indeed, there never seems to have been a time when this fortified old town with its ample harbor was not the cause of uneasiness to the English. Captain Conyngham recruited his crew from among the idle American sailors that were detained in the ports of France and Belgium, completely fitted out the "Surprise" as an armed cruiser, and sailed in her out into the narrowest part of the English Channel on Thursday, May 1, 1777. Skilfully eluding the British cruisers that guarded the harbor, he sailed up along the coast of Holland, whose Queen was distinctly hostile, and on the following Saturday captured the English packet "Prince of Orange," from Harwich, carrying the mails to Helvoetsluis, in Holland. It was the third packet England had ever

lost in these narrow seas. The next day he captured the brig "Joseph." With these important prizes he returned to Dunkirk within the week, to the surprise of the Commissioners, the uneasiness of France, and the indignation of England.

The relations between France and England at that time were very critical. They had reached a stage when the possibility of war was freely discussed between them, but neither country seemed quite ready for an open rupture. The policy of France was like the character of its aged Prime Minister, the Count de Maurepas,—vascillating, weak, timid. He kept the Commissioners constantly vibrating between hope and disappointment. He was afraid to offend England by too open an exhibition of friendship for the Colonies, and he was afraid he would give offence to the people of France if he favored England too much at their expense. So he was trying to occupy a middle ground between them. Captain Conyngham had now boldly supplied England with another substantial grievance, which caused France great embarrassment. By her treaties she had agreed not to receive privateers or allow the sale of any prizes they might bring into her harbors, and she was afraid to disregard the obligations of these treaties. France had shown her friendship for the Colonies in many ways, and it seemed to her that now the Commissioners, by placing her in this awkward position, were lacking in a proper appreciation of the obligations of that friendship. The office of a Commissioner at this time was one of no little anxiety. The Count de Vergennes, Minister of Foreign Affairs, expressed to the Commissioners, with much warmth, the displeasure of the court at the embarrassment

Conyngham's movements in the "Surprise" had caused them. The Commissioners felt the force and justice of this remonstrance, and there was some disposition among them to shift the responsibility. Arthur Lee wrote that Silas Deane was alone responsible, as he had acted without consulting the other Commissioners. All, however, agreed that Conyngham had been most imprudent in bringing his prizes into a port of France. He had taken desperate personal chances in doing so, but he was of that heroic mould that does not always heed the voice of wisdom.

This feeling at the court, however, was not shared by the masses. As the news of these bold and daring captures spread, the fame of Conyngham went with it. He became the hero of the hour. His deeds were discussed in the coffee-houses, and prints representing him with his rattle-snake flag and his captures were displayed in the shop-windows. His recklessness appealed to the Gallic temperament of these people. They hated England, and he had defied her in places where she was feared by them. She had undertaken to subdue her Colonies, and this man had retaliated by striking a blow at her for them on her own coasts. It gave them an opportunity to sneer at England, and they improved the opportunity.

Upon the demand of Lord Stormont, the British Ambassador, the prizes were released, and Conyngham and his men were thrown into prison. They suffered the form rather than the realities of imprisonment, however, and were soon released through the influence of Mr. Deane and Dr. Franklin, of whom they often spoke kindly in their correspondence as "the philosopher."

The English were now in a feverish state of apprehension. They had demanded that Conyngham be delivered up to them for summary punishment, and were deeply chagrined that he was not. Now that he was again at liberty they were sure he would be heard from again, but they were in a state of anxious perplexity because they could not tell when or where he would strike. His movements were closely watched by British spies and agents, and he was denounced in their diplomatic correspondence as a pirate and a corsair, but in their fears they respected his courage and skill, and they did not question his motives. They were so impressed with his merits that they intimated to him that he might have a place in their navy if he would swear allegiance to the King.

Though the relations between the French court and the Commissioners had been quite strained by this incident for a while, Conyngham's exploits had done no harm. The genuine dislike of the French for England, and their consequent friendship for the Colonies, prevailed, and the trouble soon blew over. Still the incident was not repeated. Thereafter no prizes were taken into French ports. Later, when Conyngham got clear of Dunkirk in the "Revenge," he returned no more to France, but sought refuge for his cutter and sent his prizes into the more hospitable ports of Spain, where the policy of the government was marked by much more wisdom, firmness, and stability, and where the hostility to England and the friendship for the Colonies was much more open and pronounced.

The Colonies, though they had sought for it, received no encouragement from the dynasties of Europe outside of France and Spain; and even in those two countries

it was hardly to be expected that those who believed in the basic principle of the divine right of kings to govern as they pleased could have much sympathy with the popular movement that was going on in America. That movement held nothing attractive for them, even as they understood it; but if they had been able to grasp its full significance, and could have foreseen the influence it was destined to have upon the future political and social conditions of the whole world, it would have been still less attractive. It was not sympathy that led France and Spain to show any partiality for America. It was their dislike and jealousy of England, and the opportunity the American Revolution afforded them to improve their relative position towards that country.

A digression may be permissible here for the purpose of noting the fact that the alliance which France, by a change of policy, formed with the United States a short time later, not only reduced her to a state of financial bankruptcy, but sowed the seeds which ultimately bore fruit in the horrors of the French Revolution. So there seems to have been some excuse for the caution and indecision with which she approached her alliance with the Colonies.

III

Although Conyngham's brief and successful cruise in the "Surprise" was a financial failure, its political results were important. The blows he struck were keenly felt by England, and they had materially widened the breach between England and France. Still, the English got a certain amount of comfort out of the way France had treated this incident, and the Commissioners felt a corresponding amount of irritation; so they lost no time in quietly pursuing the same policy along the same lines, for Conyngham's performance had given them assurance that they could depend upon him for very important results. The difficulty in getting an armed cruiser to sea had been greatly increased, so they were obliged to resort to every form of deception. There was in the harbor of Dunkirk a French cutter called the "Greyhound," which the Commissioners had secretly purchased in the name of their agent, Mr. Hodge, and which they had proceeded to arm and equip under the secret supervision of Conyngham. These movements attracted the attention of the over-zealous British spies, and the commander of an English war vessel threatened to burn the "Greyhound" in the harbor. This threat was received with indignation by the French Government and the people of Dunkirk. At the proper time Hodge went through the forms of a sale of the "Greyhound" to an English subject named Richard Allen, who presented his papers in regular form to the Admiralty and asked for a clearance to Bergen in Norway, which was duly

THE TAKING OF THE HARWICH PACKET.

From a Dutch print of 1777. (By permission of The Outlook.)

granted, and the "Greyhound" sailed, as a merchantman, out through the narrow and difficult entrance to the harbor of Dunkirk on July 15, 1777. Hodge and Allen were required to give bond to the Admiralty that the cutter would not carry on privateering, but they had not taken these Frenchmen seriously. Conyngham had received from the Commissioners another commission, dated May 2, 1777, "as captain and commander of the armed vessel or cutter called the 'Revenge.'" He boarded the "Greyhound" as she came out in the roadstead, changed her name to "Revenge," and put out to sea. Her coming out was signalled to the British fleet in the offing by a vessel under disguise at the wharves of Dunkirk, and she was pursued and fired upon, but succeeded in making her escape. The "Revenge" was a little larger and swifter than the "Surprise." When she went to sea she had on board fourteen carriage- and twenty-two swivel-guns, and a crew of one hundred and six men, sixty-six of whom were Frenchmen.

By his written sailing orders Conyngham was instructed to proceed directly to America as bearer of dispatches, and was not to molest British shipping unless he was attacked; but the verbal instructions he received from Mr. Carmichael, the Secretary of the Commissioners, were exactly to the contrary. And these verbal orders he at once proceeded to faithfully carry out. One of them was to intercept, if possible, and capture the transports carrying Hessian troops to England for service in America. By the delays which prevented this, Conyngham says in his diary, "we lost a glorious opportunity."

He was no sooner clear of Dunkirk than he began

to make valuable captures. One of these, the brigantine "Northampton," was recaptured with his prize-crew of twenty-one men and taken into Yarmouth. The others he sent to Bilbao.

The clouds of war began to thicken. Lord Stormont had a warm and protracted interview with that skilful diplomat, the Count de Vergennes, in which "he gave the reins to his wrath," as that nobleman wrote to the Marquis de Noailles, the French Ambassador in London, and during which the Count de Vergennes kept his temper. The dispatches about this time are full of a resentful and warlike spirit, but conciliatory as well as hostile methods were employed. The King of England remonstrated in friendly terms with Louis XVI., and prevailed upon the Empress of Austria to use her influence for England with her daughter Marie Antoinette. Hodge, who had returned to Paris, was arrested and thrown into the Bastile. Allen had disappeared. When the order was given a few weeks later for Mr. Hodge's release, it was enclosed to Mr. Carmichael, the Secretary of the Commissioners, in order that he might have the satisfaction of releasing him in person.

It will thus be seen how the troubles of the Colonies were agitating Europe as well as America, and that Conyngham was one of the chief causes that produced this agitation. His movements were a constant source of uneasiness and apprehension, often as fanciful as real. "This Ambassador (Lord Stormont)," wrote the Count de Vergennes to the Marquis de Noailles, on September 13, 1777, "says he has information that the famous Conyngham is preparing to return to our ports. I doubt it, for he could not do a worse thing." They

were always dreading his appearance, not only in the places to which he came, but in the places where it was not at all likely he would be.

In the mean time Conyngham was pushing his crusade against English shipping with unrelenting vigor and zeal. He sailed boldly along the east coast of England into the North Sea and the region of the Baltic, and back again through the Strait of Dover, into the Irish Channel, and from there across the rough waters of the Bay of Biscay. Reports (some of them, no doubt, exaggerated) constantly came of the arrival of his prizes in large numbers at Corunna, Ferrol, and Bilbao. One of these prizes, the "Black Prince," laden with wine, fruit, and oil, he sent into the French port of Bayonne under false papers covering a vessel of Spain, which he had procured from a Spanish merchant in Ferrol.

IV

Over these narrow seas Conyngham set the sails of his aggressive little cutter, training his guns upon British merchantmen, and was beaten about by winds and weather, month in and month out, often suffering from a scarcity of supplies. The comforts of convoys or re-enforcements were unknown to him. His resources were all included within the limits of his own gunwales. His anchor was seldom cast; his sails seldom furled. He only put into port when it became necessary. One cruise was very much like another. He would place a prize crew on board a capture and start her off for some port of his selection, and then sail on in quest of another and another until his little craft could no longer go without repairs, or his supplies were exhausted, or he had no more men to spare from his depleted crew. Sometimes he recruited his crew from the crews of his captures. His horizon was always changing, yet the outlook was pretty much the same. Sometimes it would include the gray coasts of England; sometimes the dikes of Holland; sometimes the forests of Brittany, and often the bold promontory of the Peninsula; but more frequently it included nothing but the choppy surface of these restless, narrow seas. Very little within it escaped the keen scrutiny of his spy-glass, and the burden of proof was upon every sail he overhauled to show that she was not what he was looking for. And yet, though perfectly fearless and firm, he was a gentle man, with a pleasant address, patient to a degree, tactful and conciliatory, as

THE FLAG CARRIED BY CAPTAIN CONYNGHAM IN HIS CRUISES.

he showed by the ease with which he overcame his difficulties at the Texel and in France, and in his success with his crews and the Spanish authorities at San Sebastian and in the Canaries. No stress of weather deterred him. During the equinoctial gales of September, 1777, we find him taking many prizes off the coast of Holland, which he took with him to Ferrol. Often he would have to close-reef his sails for days at a time in the teeth of driving gales (one of which sprung his bowsprit). But it was not always so. Sometimes there were bright skies and smooth waters and a cheering breeze that enabled him to carry his gaff-topsail and out-distance anything he came across. He was out in all seasons. But he was always the same preoccupied, weather-beaten, vigilant man, feeling the weight of the work he had on his hands; and there was always the excitement of the chase and the capture to enliven him, and the sustaining power of success. He captured many prizes, and those he could not capture he destroyed, and thus became an ever-increasing menace and terror to British commerce. Often he was disappointed by the recapture of his prizes before they could get into port. Upon several occasions he ran fearlessly into English and Irish ports to obtain supplies. He kept himself constantly in communication with the Commissioners in France, who were always advised of his movements, and whose instructions he received from time to time. The French Ministry was also kept fully advised of all he was doing. The King of England is reported to have said to his Minister that it would give him pleasure to be present at the hanging of Conyngham, if he could only catch him.

There was no occurrence in that part of the world at this time that attracted more attention than these valiant cruises of Conyngham. On one occasion, upon arriving at Bilbao, he learned that one of his prize crews had been imprisoned by the Spanish Government at San Sebastian. He had placed them on board a French brig (captured by him to satisfy his crew), bound from London to Corunna, with a cargo valued at four hundred thousand dollars, which had been fully insured in England. With much difficulty he succeeded in obtaining their release. Upon another occasion, while in this picturesque little harbor of Bilbao, the time of enlistment of his crew expired, and he only escaped serious difficulty by the timely arrival of one of his prizes, out of which he was able to pay them. He made many cruises from the ports of this high and rugged little province of Biscay on the western slope of the Pyrenees, whose people still retained in large measure the independence of their sturdy forefathers, and whose sympathies were with the cause of the struggling Colonies.

From this time on he had constant difficulty with his crews. He was obliged to take such men as he could get for this desperate work from among the sailors of all nations. There were a hundred and more of these fellows, speaking different languages and presenting every form of racial temperament and disposition. They were not easily governed, even by this resourceful man. Discipline became next to impossible, and frequently his crew became rebellious up to the point of mutiny. But all sailors are citizens of one community, governed by laws peculiar to themselves. Conyngham was a master of these laws, and his cruises continued

with unfailing success until they were abandoned for other reasons. Towards the end he could only secure men for one short cruise, who demanded their pay and discharge as soon as he put back into port.

The last half of the year 1777 was now gone, and Conyngham had been on his cruises throughout the whole of it. He continued them unflinchingly and successfully during the midwinter weather of that region. He had sent his prizes, during this first six months of his service, to America, the West Indies, or the ports of Spain, wherever he thought the cargoes could be disposed of to the best advantage; but through the dishonesty of his prize-masters, the mischance of recapture, or the perils of the sea, many of them never reached their destination. He had met with so much success in the Channels and to the northward that English merchantmen were becoming scarce in those waters. So he concluded to cruise in a new field. Early in 1778 he left Bilbao and sailed down the coast of Portugal, over a thousand miles, to the Strait of Gibraltar. During this cruise he captured many vessels. Upon his arrival at Cadiz he learned of a plot to burn the "Revenge" at night, by boats from the British war vessels in the harbor. The small boats did appear about midnight, but finding the crew of the "Revenge" prepared, the attempt was abandoned. Here he found funds, realized from the sale of one of his prizes, out of which he was able to refit.

Returning northward he was driven, by heavy gales and want of supplies, into the strongly fortified seaport of Ferrol, on the northwestern coast of Spain. From here, after refitting, he made another cruise to the southward as far as the Canary Islands, during which

he destroyed many English vessels and captured many more. Putting in at Teneriffe he was received with hospitality by the government. Here he had difficulty with one of his prizes. This was not an unusual occurrence, for it is a rule of the law of nations that no captor can dispose of his prize until it is awarded to him by a competent tribunal. This was a formality which Conyngham did not always observe.

From the Canaries he cruised out into the open Atlantic. All these seas were covered with British cruisers of every description, under instructions to pursue the "Revenge" into any harbor and destroy her. They were not able to catch him, but after he made his captures, and put his prize crews on board of them, the chances were they would be intercepted by these cruisers, and retaken before they could be gotten into port.

PRINT DISPLAYED IN ENGLISH COFFEE-HOUSE, DUNKIRK, 1777.
(By permission of The Outlook.)

V

Returning to Corunna, Conyngham found that British influence had closed the port against him, and this turned out to be his last cruise in those waters. He lay there for a while under the headlands, until he received permission to slip quietly into a small port farther down this bold and rocky coast of Galicia, where his coming would attract less attention, but he was warned to avoid the ports of Galicia in the future. So, after refitting there, he left European waters and sailed in the "Revenge" across the Atlantic to Martinique. From this point he made several cruises among the Windward Islands, protected American shipping, convoyed them clear of the islands, and captured, among other vessels, two British privateers. Leaving the West Indies in 1779, Conyngham sailed for Philadelphia, where he arrived in February,—more than three years after he had sailed from there in the "Charming Peggy." He had spent nearly the whole of those memorable years, 1777, 1778, in these foreign parts, cruising in the waters along the coasts and through the narrow seas of Europe and Africa, encountering almost every danger and difficulty an enterprise of this kind involves, and overcoming them with the most complete success. While American soldiers were fighting the British at Brandywine, Germantown, Saratoga, and Monmouth, this brave young Philadelphian was striking hard blows, all alone, at the same powerful enemy off their own coasts. He succeeded in eluding, by his skill, the English cruisers that were

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doing their best to capture him, and his name was upon every lip. His prizes were numbered by many scores, and the money realized by their sale amounted to very large sums. During this period his fame, in the line of his service, was exceeded by that of no one, not even by that of John Paul Jones. This was before the capture of the "Serapis" had made John Paul Jones so famous.

England was alarmed and greatly exasperated. English ships were afraid to put to sea. English merchants loaded their wares in French and Dutch bottoms. The rates of insurance became almost prohibitory. No man was dreaded more in England at this time than Conyngham. The Commissioners had come to look upon him as invincible. He had swept these seas with such intrepid energy that the attention of all Europe was called to his movements, and they gave rise to protracted discussion and diplomatic correspondence between the statesmen of England, France, and Spain.

Arthur Lee wrote to Samuel Adams from Paris, October 4, 1777: "Great part of the English commerce is already carried on in French and Dutch bottoms, which circumstance alone will prevent them from continuing the war, because it is a mortal blow at their marine."

Had it not been for the friendship and good will of France and Spain, of course it would have been impossible for the "Revenge" to have gotten to sea at all upon her cruises, armed and supplied, and refitted, and she could not have found the necessary harbors open to receive her prizes. As it was, this was accomplished with much difficulty and not a little deception, for this friendship was not at that time openly displayed. It

only operated secretly, by intrigue, under the cover of avowed disapproval, and recognition of the justice of England's remonstrances. But America got the benefit of it, such as it was, though the channels through which it came were not always free from difficulties. Only the co-operation of friendly merchants in the different harbors made it possible at all.

It is easy to understand the great service Conyngham rendered his country by this wholesale destruction of British shipping, the effect of which was immediate, but his services to the Colonies were more far-reaching. It was the policy of the American Commissioners in sending the "Surprise" and "Revenge" to sea, to irritate as well as injure England, in the hope that she might be driven into war with France, and Conyngham did much by his dash and heroism to bring about this important event, which resulted in the French-American alliance and the surrender of Cornwallis at Yorktown.

Conyngham did even more. He supplied, by his prizes, the funds out of which American vessels of war putting into Spanish ports in distress were repaired and supplied; out of which destitute American citizens landed by British cruisers on the shores of Galicia were relieved. When John Adams landed in Spain from the French frigate "La Sensible" on his way to Paris to take the place of Silas Deane, he received money out of these funds from the agents of the Commissioners at Corunna and Bayonne. What other needs of the Commissioners in France Conyngham supplied the money for by his cruises is not known, but they were, doubtless, great and important. The "Revenge" was the only vessel that took prizes at that time

in those waters. There were no funds provided from any other source for any of these necessary purposes, not even to defray the heavy expenses of the "Revenge" itself. The value and importance of Conyngham's services in these particulars cannot be over-estimated.

He had practically cleared the Channels of England of British commerce. Prizes were not so easily taken because they were not there to be taken. So Conyngham set sail for the West Indies.

Upon his arrival in Philadelphia, in February, 1779, the "Revenge" was turned over to Congress and sold at public auction in March. The State of Pennsylvania was one of the bidders at this sale, but the cutter was purchased by a firm of Philadelphia merchants, who intended to use her as a privateer. She was afterwards chartered, however, by the Executive Council, to be used in protecting the commerce of Philadelphia and in defence of the coast, under an agreement which included Conyngham as her commander. Conyngham, however, took her to sea in April as a privateer for her owners, under his old commission, probably because the stirring life which such a cruise afforded was more in accord with his heroic temperament than the more wary service of the State, which would have kept him always on the defensive, and the State gave up its charter.

Upon this cruise Conyngham's good fortune seems to have forsaken him, for, while in the vicinity of New York harbor, the "Revenge" was captured by the British frigate "Galatea." Conyngham was put in heavy irons and thrown into a dungeon beneath the British prison in New York City, where for fourteen days he lived on a scant supply of bread and bad water. He records in his diary how he was transferred to prison

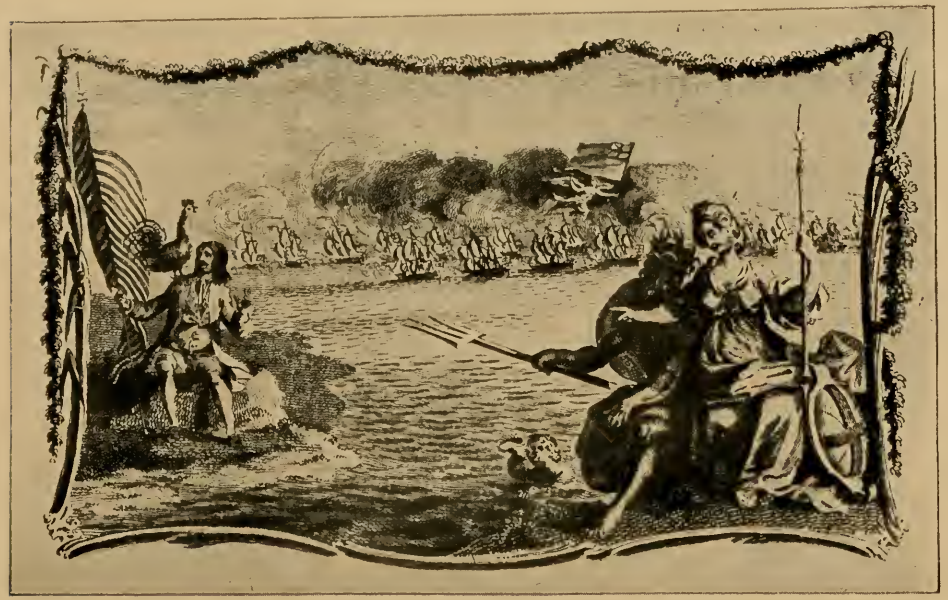
in England, where he was constantly reminded of the gallows that awaited him. At the least displeasure of his captors he was thrown, in his heavy irons, into a dungeon for forty-two days at a time, on an allowance of three ounces of beef and bread of the worst quality a day. In describing the severe and cruel treatment he received, he says, in his journal, that "dogs, cats, rats, even the grass, were eaten by the prisoners; this is hard to be credited, but is a fact." He also tells how, with strength greatly impaired by sickness and this cruel treatment, but with spirit unbroken, he finally succeeded, after many fruitless attempts, in making his escape on November 3, 1779. While he was in London, in disguise, he was entertained by the prints he saw of himself, in the shape of a monster, in the shop-windows.

When Congress heard that the English proposed to try Conyngham as a pirate the British Ministers were informed that he was a commissioned officer, and that three English officers had been placed in confinement to await his fate. He was also supplied with money by his friend Dr. Franklin and others.

VI

Captain Conyngham ultimately succeeded in making his way from London to Texel Island in the North Sea, the same place in which he had encountered such serious difficulties with the "Charming Peggy" at the outset of his career. Here he was taken, as an officer, on board the frigate "Alliance," commanded by John Paul Jones, who was then fresh from the destruction of the "Serapis." The "Alliance" sailed on December 27, 1779, cruised down the English Channel, and across the Bay of Biscay to Corunna. Here Conyngham left her and boarded the tartan "Experiment," bound for the United States. The "Experiment" was captured on March 17, 1780, by the British, and Conyngham was taken back to the hardships of Mill Prison, England. From there, some time later, he made his escape for the second time, to Ostend, and was preparing to embark from Nantes on the armed ship "Layona," undismayed, on another cruise, when he received news of the treaty of peace. From Nantes he returned to Philadelphia in the ship "Hannibal."

These periods of adversity and cruel suffering are to be remembered by this later generation of his countrymen, in connection with the years of his brilliant and uninterrupted success, for together they measure the debt of gratitude that is due to his memory. His imprisonment was the penalty imposed upon him for the injury he inflicted during those years of fruitful service upon this implacable enemy of his country.



FRENCH PRINT SHOWING BRITANNIA UPBRAIDING NEPTUNE AND POINTING TO CONYNGHAM, WHILE THE ENGLISH FLEET ARE IN FULL FLIGHT, VICTORY DESERTING THEM.

(By permission of The Outlook.)

Congress had from time to time neglected to settle Conyngham's claims for pay and prize money. Under the Continental regulations a captain and his crew were entitled to one-half the value of all uncommissioned vessels captured by them. Of this the captain was to have two-twentieths. They put off the consideration of every claim they were not obliged to meet, as the treasury was empty, and it was not until towards the close of the century that Conyngham's claims were finally adjudicated. His commissions had been taken from him by his captors, and never returned. The circumstances and conditions surrounding his brilliant services were such that it was difficult to produce legal proofs in support of his demands. Congress should have recognized all this. Should have been able to rise to a full appreciation of the requirements of his exceptional services; the strategy, prudence, and caution, even the suppression or falsification of records that were necessary to insure success. All these were recognized as justifiable in this peculiar method of warfare. But they were not able to do so. They accepted the benefits of all his heroic efforts, and withheld the reward. His claim was rejected. Much of his later life was devoted to unsuccessful efforts to obtain justice, but it still remains a reproach to his country that he never received proper pecuniary reward for his valuable and patriotic services.

There is something nearly approaching splendor in the valor and self-reliance of this remarkable young man. He found no discouragement in treacherous, narrow seas with which he was unfamiliar and over which his enemies boasted of their supremacy, hemmed in by bitterly hostile shores on one side and by har-

bors that were only friendly in secret on the other; he was not discouraged by rebellious crews or dishonesty in those to whom he was obliged to entrust his prizes; by exhausted supplies, and the uncertainty as to how or where they were to be replenished, or how his weather-beaten little cruiser was to be refitted. For nearly two years he sailed defiantly upon these venturesome reprisals, and always with success, and all from devotion to the cause of his country. It was this same spirit which pervaded Conyngham that made American independence possible. These heroic qualities in him came unscathed out of the terrible scourges of his imprisonment; they enabled him to escape from them, only to seek for other chances of the same kind, that would give him still further opportunity to inflict injury upon the enemies of his country.

It was not alone the perils he found at sea that Conyngham encountered. There was ever present the risk of being handed over to the mercy of England by the governments of France and Spain. As it turned out, this was not a very serious danger, but in the capricious and unscrupulous condition of French and Spanish diplomacy at that critical time it was a risk that many another man would have declined to take.

It requires the assistance of the imagination to enable the landsman to understand what it means to be out on the open sea in a little cutter scarcely larger than the smallest boat that now runs through our canals, buffeted by the weather and currents and waves; without hope of succor, hunted by an exasperated and powerful foe, and constantly confronted with the dangers and consequences of capture. To be always on the alert for something to attack single-handed and alone, and

embarrassed by the difficulties of getting one's prey safely into port and disposed of after it has been secured. It requires rare spirit, endurance, ability, and courage in the man who can successfully master, as Conyngham did, the difficulties of a situation like this.

It reads like a romance of the middle ages,—like a page out of the story of the buccaneers, with the same spirit of adventure running through it, though none of the greed, or thirst for personal gain. Such things are not possible now, but then they were recognized as among the calamities of legitimate warfare. The privateersmen of the Revolution sailed upon their wild errands of destruction to resist oppression, to defend their rights, to assert their manhood, to vindicate the principle of human liberty, but, though their motives were better, and their methods more merciful, they sailed along the same desperate lines, displayed the same bold and desperate spirit, and employed the same desperate means as the buccaneers who, centuries before them, sailed the Spanish Main. It is true Conyngham, while he commanded the "Surprise" and "Revenge," was not, strictly speaking, a privateer. He sailed under a commission, not under letters of marque, and his vessels were owned by the government, not by private individuals. But this is a distinction more in name than in substance.

Eighty-four years after his death the Sons of the Revolution have done but meagre justice to the memory of the most distinguished of these knights-errant of the sea by repairing the damage which time has done to his tombstone, and by calling the attention of his countrymen to the unrewarded services he rendered to the cause of American Independence, by the staggering

blow he struck at England through her commercial interests; by the large sums of money he contributed in his prizes, which he was not permitted to share; in the sufferings he courageously endured in English prisons. Few of her heroes whose names are more widely known have done as much. None were inspired by higher motives. Though he was called a pirate by the enemies of his country in the bitterness of the injury he inflicted upon them, his every act contributed, not to his own advantage, but to the cause for which he made such willing sacrifices, and risked so much; and the English tribunals, when he was wholly within their power, were obliged to recognize the fact that what he did was all within the lines of legitimate warfare, as a commissioned officer of the United States.

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